

Proverbs 4:23

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[0 : 0 0] Quite a number of you will know Kenny MacDonald, the retired minister who served in Roskeen.

And the story is told, and it was told to me certainly as a bona fide, a true story. I have no reason to doubt that that is not the case.

The story is told of an occasion when he was visiting one of the folks in his congregation and he posed him a question that I think he often posed to others. How's your heart? How's your heart?

The thing is that the fellow he was speaking to understood the question to be referring to his physical heart, the pump in his chest. Now, to complicate matters, the man had just discovered, I think just in the recent past, that he did have an issue with his heart that, as far as he knew, nobody else was aware of, and certainly not the minister.

So you can imagine how disturbing it was for him to hear this question, how's your heart, when he understood it in the way that he did. How's your heart?

[1 : 1 4] We know, of course, that Kenny was inquiring after the spiritual condition of the one he was speaking to.

And the question that he posed is a crucial question for us to ask ourselves, for us to answer, how's your heart?

And I want to consider this question with the help of a verse that we find in Proverbs, in the passage that we read in Proverbs chapter 4, and our attention will very much focus on this one verse, verse 23, Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

And I want to consider this verse under three headings that reflect three distinct parts of the verse. The first thing that we'll think about is the task commanded.

The second part of the verse, the heart of the verse, guard your heart. There is a task commended to us. Then the other heading that I have, which really relates to the first words of the verse, is this, the priority given.

[2 : 2 7] That is the priority that is to be given to the task commended. Above all else, guard your heart. And then thirdly, we'll give some thought to the final part of the verse, which we're describing as the reason provided.

The reason provided for guarding our heart and for making it a matter of first priority. And the reason is found there in the verse.

For it is the wellspring of life. So we have a task commended to guard our heart. We have the priority that is given to this task above all else.

And we have a reason provided for so doing, for it is the wellspring of life. So let's think about the verse along these lines. And we'll begin with the task commended.

Guard your heart. Well, what is our heart? We began by noting how there could be some confusion as to what we're even talking about when we meet with this word.

[3 : 32] What is our heart? In the Old Testament, throughout the Bible, but particularly in the Old Testament, and particularly in the wisdom literature, the heart is the name given to the very center of our inner life and identity.

It is the seat of our affections. It governs our will. It directs our mind and our thinking. The heart is the birthplace of our emotions and thoughts and convictions.

Our heart governs everything. What our heart is, we are. We could say this, or I could say this to you, and I could say it to myself. You are what your heart is.

And we're told that we are to guard our heart. But before considering what that involves, and that's really our primary concern, to consider how we're to do this, how are we to undertake this task that we're commended.

But before we do that, we do need to just very briefly tackle a prior issue or question that could arise. The question is this, the prior issue, the prior question.

[4 : 42] Why would we want to guard that, our heart, which God in the Bible describes as deceitful above all things and beyond cure? Who can understand it?

You recognize the words of God revealed through the prophet Jeremiah. Speaking of the human heart, deceitful above all things, beyond cure. Who can understand it?

Why would we want to guard such a thing? Of course, these words of God, spoken through Jeremiah, flag up what we might call the prior need before we can even think about guarding our heart.

And that prior need that we all have, as men and women, is of a change of heart. I'm not talking here about a change of opinion. We sometimes speak of having a change of heart, and it simply means a change of opinion.

Of course, that's not what I'm talking about at all. On this matter of our prior need and the nature of it, the words and promise of God spoken through the prophet Ezekiel can enlighten us.

[5 : 47] When in Ezekiel chapter 36, there's this discussion and presentation of the new covenant. What are the words of God that we find there? I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. This is major spiritual heart surgery that none of us can dispense with.

Becoming a Christian involves this heart transformation that is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the work of regeneration, to use the theological terminology that sometimes is used, to speak of this work of God, this work of God's Spirit in the heart of man.

Now, in our passage, we have a father speaking to his son. Verse 20, My son, pay attention to what I say. And the father speaking to his son and giving counsel and advice to his son, takes it as a given that he is speaking to one who shares his convictions, speaking to one who is a believer, and his advice is advice for one with a believer's heart.

It is one whose heart has been transformed by God, who is called upon very particularly to guard that heart that he or she has been given.

[7 : 14] Well, having simply mentioned that in the passing, let's move in to our principal concern, and that is to consider the task commended. Guard your heart.

This call to guard our heart is a call to deliberate and concerted and unstinting effort on our part. It won't just happen.

Our hearts will not be guarded without determination on our part to so guard them. You need to make it happen.

It doesn't just happen by itself. But how do we then guard our heart? What is it that we need to do? What can we do in order that we would do what we're commended to do, which is to guard our heart?

Well, let me suggest four aspects or elements involved in guarding our heart. And I'll mention them very quickly, and then very briefly just touch on each of them.

[8 : 17] First of all, I think we need to do this. Keep your heart close to God. If you are to guard your heart, may it begin here. Keep your heart close to God.

But then also feed your heart with God. And as we'll see, very especially, very particularly with God's Word. But then thirdly, protect your heart from that which is hostile to God.

And then a fourth element of this task I would suggest is this. Examine your heart with the help of God.

Let's just think of these overlapping, intertwined elements. All, I'm suggesting, coming under this umbrella of the task that is before us, to guard our hearts.

First then, keep your heart close to God. The heart, if it is about anything, is about our affections. And guarding our heart begins with guarding our love for God.

[9 : 21] And this is a love that we need to cultivate and deepen. How can we do this? How can we cultivate and deepen our love for God? Well, we can do so by spending time with God.

Spending time with God in prayer by meditating and considering and pondering on the depth of His love for us in Christ Jesus.

Love is never static. Love in any relationship is never static. We sometimes think that it's static. It's just standing still. It isn't like that. It's either growing stronger or it's waning.

We need to be on guard in this matter of our love for God. Is your love for God growing or is it waning? It's one or other.

If we are to guard our hearts, if you are to guard your heart, this is where it begins. Keep your heart close to God. But another element or another task or another way, perhaps that's the best way of putting it, another way of guarding our hearts is to feed our hearts.

[10 : 29] Feed your heart with God. Feed your heart with God's Word. The passage that we've read in Proverbs states this very clearly and very explicitly.

Indeed, the verses that lead into our text, what do they say? Verse 20 of Proverbs 4, My son, pay attention to what I say. Listen closely to my words.

Do not let them out of your sight. Keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body. Above all else, guard your heart.

For it is the wellspring of life. Feed your heart with the words of God. The words of your Heavenly Father who challenges you and commends you and urges you, even tonight, to guard your heart.

How will you do so? Listen to His words. Pay attention to His words. Listen closely to His words. Don't let His Word out of your sight.

[11 : 31] Keep God's Word within your heart. This is what we must do. This is what you must do. And maybe you're thinking, and it's quite understandable if this is what you're thinking.

Well, this is, we know this. This is the ABC of Christian discipleship. Reading God's Word. Meditating on God's Word. Paying attention to it.

Listening closely to what God would say in His Word. And that's true. It is. It is the ABC of Christian discipleship. But the reality, I think, for many of us is that sometimes we're busy debating or preoccupied with, I don't know, the J or the P or the W or any other letter you care to mention.

And we're careless about the ABC. What is at the heart and what is at the core of who we are. And certainly what is necessary if we are to conduct this task amended.

Guard your heart. Of course, the task of feeding our hearts has as its purpose to strengthen our hearts, which in itself is a form of protection.

[12 : 38] To guard is the language of protection, isn't it? But one way of guarding that which we want to protect is to make it strong. And if it is strong, then it will be able to withstand attack.

And as we feed our hearts with God's Word, so we make our hearts strong, able to resist attacks that will come upon it.

So keep your heart close to God. Feed your heart with God. Then also protect your heart from that which is hostile to God. To guard our heart is not just about what we feed our heart or keep within our heart, to use the language of the passage itself.

It's also to do with what we keep out of our hearts. If we expose carelessly our hearts to sin, as we flirt or dabble in that which is displeasing to God, we will weaken our hearts.

One commentator using language that may sound somewhat antiquated speaks of the heart as the citadel of man. The citadel of man. Now, what was the citadel in a city or town?

[13 : 50] Well, the citadel was the core fortified area of a town or city. And what was crucial for the defense of the city was to keep the enemy out of the citadel, of that core part of the city, that core part that enjoyed the protection of walls.

Crucial to the welfare and the protection of the whole city was to guard the citadel. The moment that the enemy was able to get in behind the walls of the citadel, then the battle was lost.

And when it comes to our heart, we need to keep the enemy out of our heart. We need to keep sin well clear of our heart. Once it gets onto the inside, then the task before us is that much more difficult.

Protect your heart from that which is hostile to God. But let me suggest one other aspect of this, that as we would seek with God's help to do, we would guard our hearts.

Examine your heart. But examine your heart with the help of God. One crucial aspect of guarding our hearts is the practice or discipline of examining our hearts.

[15 : 06] One of the great dangers that we all face is to imagine that all is well with our heart. Or at least to imagine that things aren't too bad. We may say, well, it's not perfect.

Yes, there are issues. It's a great word we use now, don't we? There are some issues, but it's not that big a problem. And of course, we come to that conclusion because we fail to examine our hearts.

If we only would examine our hearts, we might discover that the matter is far from as rosy as we imagine. We need to examine our hearts.

We need a regular checkup of our hearts, of our spiritual state. And let me suggest two complementary ways in which we can examine ourselves. We've entitled this sub-point, Examine Your Heart with the Help of God.

And let's begin there. We can simply do that. We can ask God to examine us and show us our hearts. The psalmist often uses that language in prayer to God.

[16 : 10] We can think of one example at the end of Psalm 139. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

So the psalmist asked for God's help that he would examine his heart and help the psalmist to see his heart for what it really was. But, you know, there's another, we might say, quite simple way of examining our hearts that this verse highlights and points to.

And it's this, simply this. Just have a good look at what comes out of your heart as that is displayed in your life, in your thoughts, in your words, in your actions.

What you see in those things will be a true reflection of what is inside. That's what the verse is saying. Above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life.

Saying what's inside will come out. So if you think, oh, it's very difficult to examine my heart. It's so mysterious and hidden. Well, just see what comes out. And that will give you a fair indication of what's on the inside.

[17 : 23] Now, we'll come back to that in a moment when we think of this third aspect. The heart is the wellspring of life. But we mention it just in the passing under the need to examine our hearts.

Let me just say one more thing in regard to the task commended. And that is that we need the help of others. I think in this matter of the heart, we can sometimes imagine, well, this is a very personal thing.

This is a thing between me and God. And I can see the strength in that. I can see that in some measure that is true. But I think it would be a mistake to imagine that we cannot or we ought not to seek the help of others in this matter of guarding our hearts.

God has called us to live in community, to live as brothers and sisters of one family. We are to help one another in a multiplicity of ways and also in this matter of guarding our hearts.

Now, no doubt there will be certain matters of the heart, of our own hearts that we would maintain and preserve. And we wouldn't share carelessly with anybody, even with other Christians.

[18 : 40] But I think we do need, each of us, and we need to cultivate Christian friendships that allow us to speak of matters of the heart.

If we find ourselves in a very isolated place where there's nobody we can speak to about matters of the heart, then it will be a difficult thing to guard our heart as we are commended to do.

That then is the first thing that we wanted to notice. The task commended, guard your heart. But let's move on to the second outline or the second heading, rather, and that is the priority given to the task.

Very particularly the words that the verse begins with, above all else, guard your heart. In actual fact, the priority of the task is made clear in at least two ways in the verse.

In the first place, the language describing the task is urgent language. The word we've just been thinking about, guard your heart.

[19 : 44] The very verb that is employed is a verb that speaks of urgency. To guard something is an urgent matter. It's an important matter. So even that verb employed points to the urgency of the task, the priority of the task.

But very especially the words that introduce the task point to the reality that the task is a matter of first importance.

Above all else, guard your heart. It couldn't be more clear. It couldn't be more absolute. Above all else, guard your heart.

Let's just try and think about that a little. It would seem that you don't need to think about it a great deal. It's so clear. But let's just think about it a little. These words, above all else.

And especially just ask ourselves the question, What is the all else that is being referred to? Let me suggest a couple of possibilities. We might understand the all else there in verse 23.

[20 : 55] Above all else, to simply be all else in life. Just for a moment, think of other things that we guard. Other things that you guard in your life. That you protect in your life.

With what care we often guard are our bodies and our health. How we guard and protect our finances. With great time invested in guarding our finances.

In securing our financial future. What effort we invest in guarding and protecting our families. Our children, if we have children.

Our family members. Of course, it's good to do all these things. How we guard our reputations. How we guard sometimes our time. How we guard our privacy.

How we guard our rights. We live in an age where everybody is busy guarding, protecting their rights. No doubt there's a place for that. It's good to guard these things up to a point.

[21 : 57] But what we're told here in God's word is, Above all else, guard your heart. Above all else, anything else that you think requires protection.

Hails into near insignificance compared to this matter. Above all else, guard your heart. So the all else could be understood in that very general way.

But I think the author here in Proverbs has something else in mind. When he speaks of guarding our hearts above all else. And I think the all else refers to the very members he speaks of in the passage.

What do I mean by that? Well, what does the passage go on to say? See, then in verse 23 we read, Above all else, guard your heart. For it is the wellspring of life.

But then immediately following, we're given tasks regarding guarding, effectively, other parts of our body. Put away perversity from your mouth.

[22 : 57] Keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Then in verse 25, it's the eyes that are the focus of attention. Let your eyes look straight ahead. Fix your gaze directly before you.

Then in verse 26 and 27, the concern of the father speaking to his son is of the feet. Make level paths for your feet. And it goes on to develop that picture.

And so there is an importance in guarding our eyes, in guarding our mouth, in guarding our feet, in directing these parts of our body in the way that they should go.

And yet, above all of these things, important though it is to do all of these things, above even all of these good and necessary things, above all else, guard your heart.

And of course, it makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Because if your heart is right, your mouth and your eyes and your feet will follow.

[24 : 04] That's simply the way it is. If your heart is right, all else will follow. But if your heart is not right, then you will in vain endeavor to guard your mouth.

You will in vain attempt to make sure that your mouth says what it ought to say and stops from saying what it ought not to say. If your heart is wrong, then you're wasting your time trying to guard your mouth or guard your eyes or guard your feet.

You simply won't be able to do so. And so, above all else, guard your heart. Is guarding your heart a matter of the utmost priority for you?

God would say to you this evening, above all else, he does say to you this evening, above all else, guard your heart.

Let's think of the third heading, the third part of the verse. That is the reason given for guarding your heart. What are we told?

[25 : 11] Well, it's there before us very clearly. Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. This is the reason that you should pay so much attention, give so much priority to guarding your heart.

It is the wellspring of life. Everything flows from the heart, and I mean everything. The picture being painted is of a spring of water, and this picture that is used highlights, at least for me, two realities.

The first reality that this picture conveys is the inevitability of the flow. You can't stop a spring from flowing. You can't keep the water in.

It will flow. That is what springs do. The moment it stops flowing, then it's no longer a spring. So with the heart. What is inside will come out.

And that leads to the second reality or question highlighted by this picture. The question is a simple enough question. What kind of water does the spring produce?

[26 : 19] The heart that is the wellspring of life, your heart, what kind of water flows from it? Is it fresh and pure and life-giving?

Does it build up and encourage and help and comfort? Or is it rancid and corrupt and life-destroying? What kind of water flows from the spring that is your heart?

This brings us back to what we were saying a few moments ago about examining our hearts and how we can do that by examining what flows from our hearts.

What comes out reveals what is inside. Let me just illustrate that in a very unpleasant way, though I imagine quite a memorable way.

It was certainly memorable for me. And it refers to a couple of years back when Joseph was in hospital. I didn't ask permission of Joseph to say this, but it's not embarrassing at all.

[27 : 22] But I remember the most vivid moment during the time that Joseph was in hospital was one occasion when we were in this room there, and Joseph called out to me and said, Dad, he says, what's this?

And he pointed to his belly button. And I'm asking for forgiveness already in advance for this very gory tale. And he says, what's that? And I had a look, and there was this horrendous gunge coming out of his belly button.

And it stank. It was disgusting. It really was horrendous. You can imagine just the horror with which I witnessed this sight before me and called the nurse, and she got a fright, and she called the doctor.

And really all I'm wanting to say is that that so vividly and so dramatically made clear to us that what was inside was a horrendous mess, and it was.

Thank God that is no longer the case. But what is inside comes out, and what comes out tells us about what is inside, and so it is with the heart.

[28 : 27] It is the wellspring of life. It flows. What's inside will come out. And what comes out, that is the question. That will tell you where your heart is, what the condition of your heart is.

What is it that flows from your heart? What is in the heart will flow, and it will flow into every area of our lives. That's the idea of calling it not only a wellspring, not only a spring, but a wellspring of life.

Everything is influenced by the heart. Every area of our lives, our relationships, your marriage, how good a husband you are, how good a wife you are, how you treat one another, how you deal with your children, and how you serve as a parent.

It will influence your work, the manner in which you do your work. It will influence your service within the church. All of these areas, and we could mention any number of areas, any area of your life, will be influenced by your heart, because your heart is the wellspring of life.

Of course, this image, the wellspring, reminds us that our service to God is whole life service. Everything is involved. It begins in and with the heart, but it flows to our whole being.

[29 : 48] We have a New Testament echo of this reality in the language of Romans, chapter 12 and verse 1, where we're challenged regarding whole life service to God.

The words, I think, are familiar to many of us there at the beginning of chapter 12. Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies, your whole lives, as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your spiritual act of worship. We are to give our whole lives to God, but what we give, and what we give and what that will be like, will be determined by the condition of our heart.

If our heart is sickly, then all our service will, of necessity, be sickly service, because the heart is the wellspring of life.

And so we're given a very powerful reason for taking on board and taking seriously the task that is commended to us. Above all else, guard your heart, but it is the wellspring of life.

[30 : 59] Let me just close by asking you about the week ahead. What does the week ahead hold for you? What do you have on your to-do list for this week, be it a written one or a mental one?

What is it that you have to do? What is it that you are intending to give priority to in this week that has begun? What are the must-do priorities for this week?

I wonder, does guarding your heart get a look-in as to that which is of first importance? You see, everything else that you plan to do, important though it is, will not be done in a manner that is pleasing to God in the absence of this one central task.

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word, and we stand certainly challenged, but more than challenged, convicted by your word.

And we come and we readily confess that we are often slow to guard our hearts in the manner that we ought. We seldom give to this task the priority that it merits.

[32 : 27] And we see the consequences as we would see what flows from our hearts, the thoughts of our mind and the words of our mouth and the actions that we do and the actions that we leave undone, all evidence of the condition of our heart.

And so we pray that you would help us to take seriously the injunction, the command, the duty commended to us in your word this evening, that we would, above all else, guard our hearts.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.